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The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Shimon Peres of Israel

December 11, 1995

The President. Please be seated.

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to welcome Prime Minister Peres back to the White House. For as long as there has been a prospect of peace in the Middle East, Shimon Peres has stood at the forefront, striving to bring a new day of security and harmony to the people of Israel and to all the people of the region.

From his early years as one of the architects of Israel's defense, he has devoted himself to ensuring the security of his Nation. And from his first term as Prime Minister in the mid-1980's, through the negotiations that led to the signing here of the Declaration of Principles with the Palestinians, to the peace of the Araba with Jordan, to the interim accord ceremony just 2½ months ago, Shimon Peres has been a visionary for peace. He has seen the way. He has been a leader on the path to peace. And time and again he has been proven right.

One of the very last things Yitzhak Rabin said was that Shimon Peres was his full partner in forging peace. With those words and the memory of my friend in mind, let me renew now the pledge I first made to Prime Minister Rabin at the beginning of my Presidency.

Mr. Prime Minister, as Israel continues to take risks for a lasting and comprehensive peace, the United States will stand with you to minimize those risks and to ensure your success. And I pledge to you personally, Shimon, that I will be your partner in peace.

Until an assassin's bullet cut short his life, Prime Minister Rabin rose time and again to the challenges of peace. The United States knows that, just as he has in the past, Prime Minister Peres will do so as well. It is a measure of how much has changed in the Middle East that on his journey here the Prime Minister met with King Hussein, President Mubarak, and Chairman Arafat, and that on his trip home he will visit with King Hassan of Morocco.

I have been especially encouraged to hear the Prime Minister talk about the progress in redeploying Israeli forces. He reviewed for me his meeting with Chairman Arafat, who reaffirmed his commitment to building upon and implementing the Declaration of Principles and the interim agreement.

The key to a lasting settlement in the Middle East is achieving peace between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon. Today Prime Minister Peres and I agreed to redouble our efforts to achieve these goals. We agree that to close the circle of peace it will take more intensive and more practical negotiations. Each side will need to make a greater effort to take account of the others' concerns. The United States stands ready to help to bring the parties together and to work with them in the negotiations. Peace is our mission. And the Prime Minister and I are determined that nothing—nothing—will deter us from this task in the weeks and the months ahead.

Today I have also spoken with President Asad of Syria about our talks here in Washington. President Asad told me he was committed to do his best to move the peace process forward and to reach an early agreement between Syria and Israel. He also agreed to my proposal that Secretary Christopher travel to the region next week to consult with him on the next steps we will take together.

We, of course, recognize that the differences will not disappear immediately. Great hurdles must be overcome. But an Israel-Syria settlement is worth our every effort. It would end the Arab-Israeli conflict. It would establish a comprehensive peace. It could transform the face of the entire Middle East and the lives of all its inhabitants.

That was Yitzhak Rabin's dream. Here at the White House, that soldier of peace said, "Enough of blood and tears." The United States is heartened that Shimon Peres will carry on.

And together, we will work to fulfill Yitzhak Rabin's legacy.

Mr. Prime Minister, as you go forward, the United States will go with you and proudly.

Prime Minister Peres. Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, Mr. Secretary of State, ladies and gentlemen. Let me say from my heart that we are so moved by the American participation in our great sadness when Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated. Mr. President, you have led a most unusual delegation that moved our heart. The President himself, two former Presidents, the Secretary of State, two former Secretaries, the leaders of the Senate, of the House of Representatives, an important corps of journalists, of leaders. There was greatness in the sadness, as Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated because he was right, not because he was wrong.

And may I say, ladies and gentlemen, that President Clinton did something most unusual. He has added an expression to the Israeli dictionary: *Shalom, chaver*. It is a very unusual combination. And for ones who don't understand Hebrew, let me say, the Russians are saying "a comrade," which I don't know exactly what it is; the Americans are saying "a friend," which I understand what it is; but the Israelis are saying "*chaver*," which means "togetherness." And since the President has used this word, we feel more together. We feel that we have an enriched dictionary among ourselves and between the United States of America and us. Believe me, I speak on behalf of all the Israelis: For this enrichment of expression and feelings, thank you very much.

Q. Mr. President—

Prime Minister Peres: No, I—[laughter]. Don't discriminate the Israeli part. [Laughter]

So I should really start by saying, *Shalom, chaver*. These, your farewell words to Prime Minister Rabin, echoed throughout our land. The people of Israel will never forget your moving demonstration of solidarity in a moment of grief, of shock, of disbelief and determination. For us, you're a leader; you're a friend.

I stand beside you, Mr. President, in the footsteps of my partner, a great captain of peace, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Together with you—and I know how much he trusted you—we scaled the trail from the depths of hostility to the highlands of promising peace. Indeed, together we shall stay the course and, with firm resolve, reach a destiny of lasting and a secure peace. A peace for the whole of the Middle

East—Arabs and Jews, Jews and Arabs—this was Yitzhak Rabin's quest. It is my commitment.

Your leadership and devotion to the cause of peace are manifestly clear to Israel and to its neighbors as well. This is a constant direction, not a point of passing. May I say that as Bosnia reeled in agony, you offered a compass and a lamp to a confused situation, ending blood, offering hope, like in the Middle East. It is time to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. With you, Mr. President, in the forefront, by our side, it may become possible, as it did in the past, bringing thereby peace, security, and prosperity to all people. Prophecy may meet reality again and again.

Since your Presidency and through our partnership, the Middle East has already undergone an unbelievable change. Here at the White House on September 13, 1993, we came to grips with the heart of the problem. The Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles created a roadmap by means of which the Palestinians, alongside Israel, are becoming masters of their destinies. Palestinian elections are a new promise that reflects the interaction between peace and democracy. Nothing is a better guarantee for peace than democracy.

Israel and Jordan are displaying its fruits day-in and day-out. A barren rift valley is pregnant with new prospects. Peace with Egypt remains a cornerstone of the peace process for, by it, regional war is no longer the justification of policies that leaves lands deserted rather than flourishing.

Today we seek an opening of a new, maybe a final chapter: the end of war in the Middle East in its totality. Peace between Syria and between Lebanon and Israel will leave no reason whatsoever for the continuation of belligerency. Syria, together with us, stands in a unique position to contribute to a peaceful Middle East. The conflict between us has been bitter, complicated. The land that gave birth to prophecy can now give birth to yet a new vision.

President Asad and myself can, with the assistance of your leadership, Mr. President, and the assistance of your administration and Congress, build a new equation of genuine peace and security to end terror, to begin a market economy. I speak of boundaries of permanent peace. I speak of lands of new and great opportunity. Peace between us must indeed put an end to the conflict that has mired our region for so long. The President, the Secretary of

State, and their peace team will continue to create with us the architecture for peace in the region. We welcome you.

Today I discussed the possible new opportunity with President Clinton. I find a warmth and an openness in our discussion, and I am very grateful. Mr. President, we are proud to be partners with you in working to make this prospect become a reality. It is my hope that President Asad will join us soon on this historic journey.

To my fellow Israelis, I can say we have in you, Mr. President, a true friend and a true partner. There is no time now for political vacation. We don't intend to rest. We intend to continue the momentum, full speed ahead, in the name of all Israelis. And I think all Israelis, they'll tell you, Mr. President, *toda, chaver*, thank you, *chaver*.

Israel-U.S. Space-Based Experiments

The President. Thank you.

Let me make one brief comment, and then I will take questions, as will the Prime Minister.

As part of our effort to support Israel's advances in science and technology, I have today agreed with Prime Minister Peres to proceed with space-based experiments in sustainable water use and environmental protection. These experiments will take place in unmanned space vehicles, in the shuttle program, and in the international space station. And as a part of this effort, we will also train Israeli astronauts to participate in these programs. We look forward to working out the arrangements for this co-operation, and we are absolutely certain that it will benefit Israel's high-tech development as well as our own.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan are critical to the Middle East peace process. Yet none of these are true democracies, and all of them are now showing serious signs of internal dissent, even violent dissent. At what point does the firm U.S. backing of such nondemocratic governments become counterproductive?

The President. Well, first of all, those countries have to work out their internal affairs for themselves. But as long as they are responsible actors on the international stage and as long as they are contributing to the peace process in the Middle East, we will consider them our

partners for peace in the Middle East. That's the first and most important thing: How do they conduct themselves, and are they supportive of the peace process?

Q. Mr. President, you have just managed to successfully bring three sides together in Dayton, Ohio. Is it the time to use Camp David II model in the Middle East and bring President Asad and Prime Minister Peres together to this country? And if not, did you hear any new ideas from Prime Minister Shimon Peres? Thank you.

The President. Well, yes, Prime Minister Peres had some very good ideas which we shared together and which I think will form the basis of further action. At some point, I think the leaders of countries that are interested in peace have to meet; leaders have to meet and work together and work their problems out. But I think that will come in time.

Keep in mind, we worked quite a long time on peace in the Middle East—I mean, in Bosnia—before the parties came together at Dayton. So that will come, I think.

Balkan Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, on the Bosnia issue, since the accord, Bosnian Croats have reportedly burned a village, two French pilots are still captive, a number of cease-fire violations have occurred. It remains so unstable there. Why should the American people have any confidence that our troops will be safe there?

The President. First of all, I don't think it remains so unstable there. I think, basically, you—in some ways you made the case. It has not been a perfect observation of the agreement, but basically the agreement they made has been observed. There has not been a resumption of hostilities. There are some rough edges there, which is why NATO and others who are cooperating with us were asked to come in and help to separate the forces—supervise the separation of the forces—the transfer of land, the redeployment of forces out of land which they no longer are responsible for, and then to maintain a secure environment while the agreement is implemented.

And I see no reason to believe, based on the evidence so far, that all the parties who signed the agreement are not fully committed to implementing it. In fact, over the weekend we received some more encouraging comments from some of the Serb leaders about being com-

mitted to the end of the war and the implementation of the agreement.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, do you feel—

Prime Minister Peres. You know, gentlemen, Bosnia is Muslim, and Israel is Jewish. Yet, this is not the right distinction when it comes to politics in my eyes. The distinction is between aggressors and defenders. And I salute the United States of America to try to put an end to aggression and really help the people that were attacked to survive and not to suffer any longer.

Thank you.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, do you feel now that the chances for peace between Israel and Syria are better than they were one month or 2 months ago?

The President. Yes.

Q. And is this the impression that you informed today to Mr. Peres?

The President. That is the impression I have today, yes.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, did you review to President Clinton your readiness to withdraw from Golan Heights as part of the peace agreement with Syria?

Prime Minister Peres. You cannot pin on a single issue. We are talking about the Syrian-Israeli peace process in its totality, and I have revealed the totality.

Q. Yes, but as one of the—

Prime Minister Peres. I understand what you—the answer you are seeking, and that's the answer I am having. [Laughter]

Q. Mr. President, do you know the price that Israel is ready to pay for peace with Syria? Are you going to transfer this information to President Asad? And are you maybe considering a visit in the Middle East, in Damascus and Jerusalem?

The President. Well, first of all, the Secretary of State will communicate to President Asad the essential elements of my meeting with the Prime Minister, as agreed upon between the Prime Minister and myself.

But I would just reiterate something that he said. I think the most important thing is not what any particular issue is, but I think that the atmosphere is better than it was before—as the previous questioner asked—and very frankly, as sad as it is to say, I think the Syrian leader and the Syrian people now see the excep-

tional price that former Prime Minister Rabin and Prime Minister Peres have been willing to pay in their search for peace.

I think that is the fundamental new reality here. I don't think any of the details matter nearly as much as that fundamental new reality, because in the end, in any peace agreement, the parties have to have two things. One is a certain level of trust that the people actually, on either side, intend to go forward with the agreements they have made because it's in their interest and because they can be believed. And the second is a certain system of observing the implementation of that trust. That's more important than all the details. So that is, I think, the central new reality.

Balkan Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, you've talked about Bosnia a little bit. You still have not gotten the congressional approval you expect. You are about to head off to Paris to sign a commitment. Are you going to send U.S. troops if you don't get that approval from Congress in regards to the timetable you want for sending the troops over there?

The President. First of all, I believe that we will secure that approval. I believe that Congress will support the troops. I had a good talk yesterday with Senator Dole and with Speaker Gingrich, and I know that we have these congressional delegations that have been to Bosnia that are coming back; I think two more are coming back. And I believe when it is all debated and all said and done in the next few days that the Congress will find a way to express their support for our troops. That's what I believe will happen.

Q. Will you send them anyway, sir?

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, if you could tell us, do you see in the context of a peace agreement with Syria the need for a formal defense alliance with Israel, an upgrading of security—of the secure relationship. To follow up on that, also, if something would go wrong on Bosnia, do you see how that could affect this whole idea of U.S. troops on the Golan Heights? Thank you very much.

The President. Well, first let me say that the United States has not been asked in any negotiations by either party to put troops on the Golan as of this time. We have not been asked.

Secondly, if one thing should be clear to the entire world in the history of the last several years, it is that the security of Israel is terribly important to the United States. We have made an explicit policy commitment which has been carried through under Presidents of both parties to maintain the qualitative and technological edge that Israel needs to guarantee its security in an atmosphere that has been far more hostile than it is even today.

And so I think you can, as we go forward here, you can be assured that the security of Israel in going to be one of the main pillars of America's defense commitments and one of the main things we will be concerned about as we move through the peace process.

Balkan Peace Process and Jonathan Pollard Espionage Case

Q. Mr. President, one question directed specifically towards you. Can you update us on the possible release of the two French pilots in, presumably in Serbian control, and whether or not that issue could derail the peace agreement signing on Thursday in Paris? And question to both of you on, unrelated, did you have a chance to discuss the Jonathan Pollard spy case now that he has been granted Israeli citizenship, and did the Prime Minister ask you to release Pollard?

The President. You got a lot in there in a little time. [Laughter]

Very briefly, I wish I could tell you more about the French pilots. I can tell you this, that we are in very close touch with the French. They are working very, very hard on this. I have no factual update for you. They are working it very hard, and they expect the peace signing to go forward on time.

With regard to Mr. Pollard, the Prime Minister mentioned it to me and gave me a letter setting forth his position on it. As you know, Mr. Pollard came up once before, I think in early 1994. If he requests executive clemency, I will, of course, review that request, as I would anyone who requested it. But he has to make a request, and it has to come through the ordinary channels before I can do that.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, the Palestinian Authority is holding elections next month. I would like to ask you, how do you assess the performance of the Palestinian Authority and the perform-

ance of Yasser Arafat leading to the Palestinian elections? And when are you planning to visit the Palestinian Authority as well as the rest of the Middle East? I asked you this before; I would like to know if you are going to make another trip?

And for Mr. Prime Minister, I just want to— [laughter].

The President. You went to the Wolf Blitzer [Cable News Network] school of journalism, I think. [Laughter] No, go ahead, please.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, I just want to wish you the great success in your performing your duties in this very crucial time in Israel and the Middle East. While I'm wishing you this, I would like very much to ask you, Mr. Prime Minister, to release the Palestinian—

Prime Minister Peres. Be careful with your timing.

Q. —to release the Palestinian prisoners as soon as possible so they will go back to their families and we will really have peace in the region, especially in the Authority. Thank you.

The President. Let me say, first of all, about the elections, I expect them to go forward; I expect them to be successful; I expect them to be held in a way that is generally applauded for their integrity. And I expect to go back to the Middle East at an appropriate time, but I don't have a trip scheduled. I think I'd like it to be in the context of another advance for the cause of peace. And that's where we are.

Prime Minister Peres. Before Christmas, 450 villages in the West Bank and all the major cities, as well as Gaza and Jericho, will be under the rule of the Palestinians for the first time in history. Israel has implemented one of our greatest moral promises: not to rule another people. Believe me, it makes us content and complete by doing so.

Part of the agreement was to release another 1,000 prisoners before the elections. I hope we shall release a little bit more than that, but for the people that have bloodstains on their hands. Until now, we kept every promise, every word. We were ahead of time. And I thought the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin puts an extra responsibility upon me to really do everything true to the commitment.

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 110th news conference began at 1:14 p.m. in Room 450 of the Old Execu-

tive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to King Hussein of Jordan, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Chairman Yasser Arafat of the

Palestine Liberation Organization, and President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria..

Statement on Action To Protect Retirement Plan Savings

December 11, 1995

Hard-working Americans are doing their part to save for the future. Americans who work to support their families and save for retirement should not have to worry that the money they earned won't be there when they need it most.

Today my administration is taking action to give the Government the tools necessary to assure American workers they can put their 401(k) savings into a system that is as safe as Fort Knox.

Every American should be encouraged to set aside money for their retirement and make investments in their economic future. Our action will assure millions of Americans that they can put their savings and their trust into a financially sound retirement plan. My administration will continue to do its part to stand guard over Americans' retirement funds.

Letter to Senate Democratic Leader Thomas Daschle on the Plan for Implementation of the Balkan Peace Agreement

December 11, 1995

Dear Mr. Leader:

Just four weeks ago, the leaders of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia came to Dayton, Ohio, in America's heartland, to negotiate and initial a peace agreement to end the war in Bosnia. There, they made a commitment to peace. They agreed to put down their guns; to preserve Bosnia as a single state; to cooperate with the War Crimes Tribunal and to try to build a peaceful, democratic future for all the people of Bosnia. They asked for NATO and America's help to implement this peace agreement.

On Friday, December 1, the North Atlantic Council approved NATO's operational plan, OPLAN 10405, the Implementation of a Peace Agreement in the Former Yugoslavia. On Saturday, General George Joulwan, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, who will be commanding the NATO operation, briefed me in Germany on the final OPLAN.

Having reviewed the OPLAN, I find the mission is clearly defined with realistic goals that can be achieved in a definite period of time. The risks to our troops have been minimized to the maximum extent possible. American

troops will take their orders from the American general who commands NATO. They will be heavily armed and thoroughly trained. In making an overwhelming show of force, they will lessen the need to use force. They will have the authority, as well as the training and the equipment, to respond with decisive force to any threat to their own safety or any violations of the military provisions of the peace agreement. U.S. and NATO commanders believe the military mission can be accomplished in about a year.

A summary of the OPLAN is attached. Of course, members of my staff and the Administration are available to answer your questions and further brief you on the OPLAN as you require.

I consider the Dayton peace agreement to be a serious commitment by the parties to settle this conflict. In light of that agreement and my approval of the final NATO OPLAN, I would welcome a Congressional expression of support for U.S. participation in a NATO-led Implementation Force in Bosnia. I believe Congressional support for U.S. participation is immensely im-